Chapter 23

Rounding Up the Usual Suspects: Causation and the Viking Age Diaspora

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The Scandinavian diaspora of the late eighth to mid-eleventh centuries AD, known as the Viking Age, was both widespread in scale and profound in impact. Long-range maritime expeditions facilitated a florescence of piracy, trade, migration, conquest and exploration across much of Europe — ultimately extending to western Asia and the eastern seaboard of northern North America (Brink & Price 2008). This diaspora contributed to state formation and/or urbanism in what are now Ireland, Scotland, England, Russia and the Ukraine — not to mention within Scandinavia itself. It was one of the catalysts leading to fragmentation of the Carolingian empire and it created the semi-independent principality of Normandy.

Some territories, such as Iceland and the Faroe Islands in the North Atlantic, were extensively settled for the first time. Others, such as the Northern and Western Isles of Scotland, the English 'Danelaw' and parts of northern France received an overlay of Scandinavian place-names suggestive of significant immigration, however difficult to quantify. Parts of Greenland were also settled, probably during a hiatus in indigenous occupation, and at least one Scandinavian expedition overwintered at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland.

Even this briefest of outlines illustrates that the Viking Age Scandinavian diaspora was non-trivial. As one of the last so-called 'barbarian migrations' of post-Roman Europe, it is also among the best documented. Its study is thus uniquely important for an understanding of European history. It also provides among the best examples of three processes of wider relevance: the potential impact of small-scale but highly militarized non-state communities on neighbouring 'complex societies'; the development of transnational identities in a pre-capitalist world; and the seaborne colonization of islands. Studying the causes of the Viking Age is potentially as illuminating and complex as interpreting the decline of the Roman Empire.

This importance is matched by a distinguished tradition of scholarship, regarding both Scandinavia itself and the regions influenced by the Scandinavian diaspora. Occasionally, however, it could be argued that the forest has been lost for the trees. There are several reasons for this. Most importantly, a phenomenon this extensive in time and space can only realistically be addressed with great simplification. Many discussions of the causes of the Viking Age have thus been conducted in the context of scholarly traditions, focusing on the variables and sources of specific local relevance (e.g. Näsman 2000a; Vésteinsson *et al.* 2006). Others address the grand sweep of the problem by constraining it to brief treatment within broader narratives (e.g. Roesdahl 1991, 187–94; Richards 2000, 18–19; Byock 2001, 82–4; Sawyer 2003a, 106–9; Hadley 2006, 16–21; Woolf 2007, 52–7). Yet others address the problem of scale by challenging the relevance of the Viking Age as a socio-economic watershed or a useful unit of analysis (e.g. Svanberg 2003, 201–3; Hodges 2006).

The hesitancy to view the 'Viking' diaspora as meaningful at the macro-scale — or in some scholarly traditions to discuss it at all — may ultimately owe its roots to a reaction against the gross misuse of Viking Age archaeology as racist propaganda by the National Socialists and others between 1920 and 1945 (see Müller-Wille 1994; Nondier 2002, 509–11). Nevertheless, writers such as Näsman (2000a) and Svanberg (2003) have an important point when they demonstrate that Scandinavian material culture was highly regionalized in the period under consideration. To understand the early Middle Ages in Europe one must consider developments both within and between regions (cf. McCormick 2001; Wickham 2005).

Despite these practical and historical impediments, a small number of studies *have* sought to grapple with the causes of the Viking Age in holistic fashion, limiting the danger of information overload through varying combinations of generalization and

case study (e.g. Sawyer 1982a; Lund 1989; Myhre 1993; Hernæs 1997; Randsborg 2000; McCormick 2001; Simek 2004). Adopting this tradition, what follows combines an overview with more detailed consideration of early Viking Age (particularly late eighth- to early ninth-century) Scandinavian raiding in the west. It starts from the premise that cause must precede effect in time. This may be obvious, but the disproportionate abundance of evidence from the middle of the ninth century and later has often led scholars of the Viking Age to read history backwards, from the known to the unknown, potentially skewing our understanding of causal chains.

Collectively, previous scholarship has considered the causes of the Viking Age in terms of one or more of the following:

- Technological determinism;
- Environmental determinism;
- Demographic determinism;
- Economic determinism (the growth of urbanism and trade);
- Political determinism (the weakness of neighbouring empires and/or the centralization of power within Scandinavia);
- Ideological determinism.

Each explanation of the Viking Age combines these perspectives in differing configurations, creating a wide variety of possible models. It would be impractical to review the resulting historiography in a work of this length. Instead, this paper will return to first principles, the ingredients of the story of the Viking Age, briefly considering them in light of both present knowledge within 'Viking studies' (including archaeology, history and related fields) and insights from the social sciences (specifically anthropology and sociology). In so doing it seeks to present a brief overview of existing wisdom, to challenge several problematic assumptions and to introduce a few new issues which have not yet received the attention they merit. It is intended to open fresh debate regarding the causes of the Viking Age, and to provide a comparative example for the study of analogous sea-borne diasporas globally.

Technological determinism

Not all of the traditional 'causes' of the Viking Age remain convincing in light of present knowledge, or in the context of comparative chronological or spatial perspectives. Of these, the demotion of naval technology and seafaring knowledge is perhaps the most surprising to the non-specialist. The high level of technological skill and social signalling embodied by boats and ships in Viking Age Scandinavia has been reinforced by all research since the first great ship-burial excavations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (e.g. Crumlin-Pederson 1995; Owen & Dalland 1999; Westerdahl 2008). However, it is equally clear that large-scale seaborne raiding, conquest and/or migration could emanate from Scandinavia long before.

Weapon sacrifices, at Nydam I (fourth century AD) in Denmark for example, indicate the long-range movement of large armies by boat during the Roman Iron Age (Randsborg 1995). In the fifth century, ships of northern Germanic origin facilitated a scale of Anglo-Saxon influence on (and, based on DNA evidence, migration to) Britain that exceeded or equalled that of their Viking Age successors (cf. Hills 2003; Oppenheimer 2007). Thus the question of ship technology, particularly developments of keel and sail, are moot (Haywood 1999). It is possible that sails were adopted in some parts of Scandinavia before the Viking Age in any case (cf. Paasche 2006; Bonde & Stylegar 2009, 162; Crumlin-Pedersen this volume).

If something meaningful did change in the late eighth century it is likely to be how technology was employed, be it changes in tacking practices (Carver 1995) or a shift to 24-hour sailing (cf. McCormick 2001, 788). In this hypothetical eventuality, we could best interpret change as reflecting the motivation to travel further and quicker — and thus as an effect of the Viking Age. In brief, ships capable of carrying warriors long distances are a necessary prerequisite for the Viking Age, but clearly they did not 'cause' it.

Environmental determinism

A second old chestnut of limited relevance is climate, specifically the possible impact of the Medieval Warm Period (MWP) (e.g. Dansgaard *et al*. 1975; Dugmore *et al*. 2007, 14). The problems here are the timing of the MWP itself and of putative climate-induced settlement expansion. Some climatological research is consistent with warming in the centuries leading up to the end of the first millennium AD (e.g. Dahl-Jensen *et al*. 1998). Conversely, other studies would place the MWP after the turn of the millennium and emphasize its regional variability (e.g. Bradley *et al*. 2003). It has even been argued that the MWP never existed (e.g. Hughes & Diaz 1994). Thus favourable climatic conditions may or may not have enhanced opportunities for Scandinavian settlement in Iceland (and later Greenland). Even if they did, the earliest evidence of Norse settlement in Iceland presently dates to the 870s (Vésteinsson *et al*. 2006). This is almost a century after the first certain raids of the early Viking Age (such as the infamous attack on Lindisfarne in AD 793). Greenland in turn

was not settled by Scandinavian migrants until the end of the tenth century (Arneborg 2003), with brief forays to the 'New World' following shortly thereafter (Wallace 2003).

Demographic determinism

In more general terms, Scandinavia did share in the widespread European population and settlement boom of the end of the first millennium AD — a well-established phenomenon which may partly reflect environmental conditions (e.g. Fossier 1999; Dyer 2002). Thus the issue of climate merges into that of demography. In its most simplistic form, that of nebulous 'population pressure', this too can be dismissed as a realistic cause of the Viking Age (Hernæs 1997, 57–8). The chronology of settlement expansion varies by region in Scandinavia — with some locations showing little change from the Roman Iron Age until economic crisis and plague in the fourteenth century (e.g. Skre 2001). Nevertheless, in many areas forest clearance and settlement expansion is now known to have progressed during the course of the Viking Age, rather than preceding it (e.g. Andersen *et al*. 1988; Karlsson & Robertsson 1997; Näsman 2000a, 2–3). In parts of Norway, for example, it may well be characteristic of the end of the period (Myhre 1998).

Related to the issue of demography is a more implicit, but widely held, assumption that Viking Age settlement expansion entailed a mechanistic 'wave of advance' in which the Germanic-speaking peoples of Scandinavia slowly colonized neighbouring territories. The western diaspora can provide one example (Barrett 2006; cf. Woolf 2007, 52–7, 286–9). It is commonly treated as a sequential process beginning with the Northern Isles of Scotland, from which it is presumed Scandinavian raiders in mainland Britain, Ireland and sometimes even continental Europe first operated (e.g. Sawyer 2003a, 109; Ridel 2007). From there, conquest and settlement spread to Ireland and ultimately — under the dynasty of Ímar/Ivar of Dublin and his cronies — to Anglo-Saxon England (see Wormald 1982, 141; Biddle & Kjølbye-Biddle 2001, 81–4). The extreme version of this 'wave of advance' model envisions the foundation of an early (or even pre-) Viking Age Scandinavian kingdom in Scotland, Laithlinn, which moved its base of operations to Dublin in the AD 840s (Ó Corráin 1998a; Sawyer 2003b; Stefánsson 2003, 204; cf. Etchingham 2007). Although the *second* (Irish and English) chapter of this story is likely to be correct (Downham 2007), the assumption of early Scandinavian settlement in Atlantic Scotland cannot yet be supported on the basis of reliable evidence.

The 'wave of advance' model is ultimately traceable to post-Viking Age Icelandic and Norwegian sources in which early pirate settlements in the Northern Islands were assumed to have existed (e.g. Guðmundsson 1965, 7–8; Ekrem & Boje Mortensen 2003, 67). However, there is not yet evidence from settlement sites, graves, hoards or the documentary record to demonstrate that Scandinavian migrants were living in Atlantic Scotland prior to the mid ninth century (Barrett 2003 and references therein). Newly published 'early' radiocarbon dates from Viking Age settlements in the Northern Isles (Hunter 2007, 139–40; Ballin Smith 2007, 289–94) do not change this conclusion. None unambiguously pre-dates the mid ninth century. Marine-reservoir effects from cooked fish, not to mention statistical chance, could easily account for the one anomalously early date from Norwick, Shetland, from carbonized food deposits adhering to a soapstone pot (Ballin Smith 2007, 289, 293; cf. Barrett & Richards 2004). Similarly, a single pre-ninth-century date from phase 7.1 at Pool 'may represent earlier residual material from a levelling surface' (Hunter 2007, 139).

Weber's (1992; 1993; see also Ballin Smith 1995) suggestion that pre-Viking Age combs from Orkney were manufactured using reindeer antler imported from Scandinavia has also now been re-evaluated (Ashby 2006). Several Orcadian combs of Pictish style were indeed probably manufactured using this raw material, but none of these can be demonstrated to predate the ninth century based on stratigraphy or absolute dating. At present, there is no reason to suppose that Norse settlement in the Scottish isles need have taken place prior to the first documented overwintering of Viking armies in Ireland (e.g. AD 841 for Dublin), England (AD 850/1) and Frankia (AD 852/3).

After this date, there is clear evidence for the transfer of information and objects around the Irish Sea (e.g. Paterson 2001; Johnson 2001; Graham-Campbell 1998). In the few cases where the chronology of this exchange can be established, however, Ireland often had precedence. One example is the presence of belt buckles of probable Irish manufacture in Scottish Viking Age graves (Paterson 2001). Another is the use of fairly standardized arm bands as a medium for storing silver bullion. These circulated widely in late ninth- and early tenth-century Ireland (Sheehan 1998, 178), only being adopted (in the altered style know as 'ring-money') in Atlantic Scotland in the mid-tenth century (Warner 1976; Graham-Campbell 1995, 38–40). In cases where geographically 'Scottish' styles from Dal Riata or Pictland may have influenced Irish fashion, such as the adoption of bossed penannular brooches in the late ninth century, the chronology

postdates Scandinavian settlement in both regions (Graham-Campbell 1975; Michelli 1993; Johnson 2001).

Lastly, there is now a limited quantity of evidence for human-migration patterns from isotopic analysis of teeth from Viking Age burials in Atlantic Scotland. It too may imply some redistribution of population around the 'Insular' world, in addition to direct immigration from Scandinavia (Montgomery *et al*. 2003; Montgomery & Evans 2006).

Starting from this archaeological source material (rather than the assumptions of much later medieval texts), it may be prudent to reconstruct a scenario consistent with how migration has been observed to unfold cross-culturally. Rather than spreading gradually from a source population, migrants move along networks (e.g. Brettell 2000, 107). The nodes of these networks are places which have either what migrants seek (e.g. perceived economic opportunities) or information and support (often from related prior migrants) to help them find it. Thus distances are conceptualized in terms of social space rather than physical geography (cf. Näsman 1991) — potentially leading to 'leap-frog' patterns of mobility. The potential relevance of this phenomenon, observed in an increasingly transnational twentieth- to twenty-first-century world (e.g. Santiago-Irizarry 2008), to prehistoric societies is corroborated by archaeological examples from as far afield as the Mediterranean (Forenbaher & Miracle 2005) and the Caribbean (Keegan 2004).

In the earliest decades of the Viking Age the objective of short-term Scandinavian migrants was portable wealth, which was probably more abundant in Ireland's ubiquitous monasteries (including Iona in Irish-speaking Dal Riata, Argyll) and in mainland Pictland than in the less densely settled islands of northern Scotland. This is not to say that there was *no* treasure in the north (Small *et al*. 1973) — but the relative difference must have been substantial. Only later, in the period of settlement, would the Northern Isles have been equally relevant destinations for seafaring Scandinavians. The recent suggestion that early medieval Ireland was impoverished (Wickham 2005, 817) is not really relevant here, partly because this judgement is not *vis-à-vis* Atlantic Scotland and partly because the case is overstated. It relies largely on a comparison with Denmark which omits differences in cultural practices surrounding the deposition of elite metalwork in each region. Unlike Denmark, metalwork was first routinely consigned to water or earth in Ireland after the Viking Age had started — at which point the island was demonstrably wealthy (cf. Hedeager 1992, 70–81; Sheehan 1998).

In support of the 'leap-frog' hypothesis, the distances to travel in early medieval northern Europe were small in terms of sailing and rowing time — particularly in comparison with contemporary land transport (e.g. Carver 1990; Englert 2007). To provide just one example, the sea voyage from Norway to Ireland probably took less than two weeks based on medieval sources (e.g. Benediktsson 1968, 33, regarding the indirect route via Iceland). Unlike ocean-going ships, early bases in the Northern Isles of Scotland were not an essential precondition for the Viking Age as we know it.

It remains for future studies to evaluate fully the implications of the 'leap-frog' hypothesis for the migrant experience in the west. The theory may, for example, alter the traditional model of Scandinavian immigration to Atlantic Scotland — which envisions a pioneer stage of contact, a consolidation stage of settlement and an establishment stage in which indigenous material culture was replaced in one way or another (for variations on this theory see Buteux 1997:262; Morris 1998; Graham-Campbell 2003, 128–9). If the Irish Sea (a traditional centre of cultural influence for Atlantic Scotland) became a 'Norwegian lake' early in the Viking Age, perhaps some aspects of Scandinavian material culture were adopted *before* settlement — reversing the traditional order.

In contrast with the western story, it could be argued that the eastern Scandinavian diaspora *was* a wave of advance, consistent with an underlying demographic imperative. It ultimately involved the sequential foundation of Staraya Ladoga, Novgorod (and its predecessors) and Kiev (Price 2000; Duczko 2004). Even in this case, however, one sees a 'leap-frog' between the Scandinavian kingdoms of the Baltic and the first trading settlement on Lake Ladoga in Russia (with its access to both furs and trade routes to the east). For example, Scandinavian influenced burials seem to have first appeared in intervening regions such as Estonia later in the Viking Age, during the tenth century (Mägi 1999, 35).

Thus far, I have minimized the relevance of settlement expansion and 'population pressure' to the origins of the Viking Age. It may be, however, that other aspects of demography merit further attention. Critical among these is the issue of gender. It has long been established that much Viking Age loot of Insular origin (that is from Ireland or Britain) ultimately found its way into female Viking Age graves in western Norway (Wamers 1985; 1998; Graham-Campbell 2001; Raven 2005, 43). It has also been proposed that Iron Age female grave-goods in Scandinavia may well represent 'bride-wealth' in at least a general sense of the term (Arrhenius 1995; Kristoffersen 2004). Put together, *one must ask if the earliest Viking raids were motivated to acquire such goods* (cf. Burström

1993 regarding Gotlandic silver hoards)? Elsewhere in early medieval Europe young aristocratic men often served as warriors in the retinues of others — or alternatively formed military brotherhoods — until they married and established their own households (Brooks 1971, 74; Halsall 2003, 50, 106–8). Based on this analogy (and later medieval Norse sources) it is easy to imagine participation in raiding parties as part of a Scandinavian male's life-cycle in the early Viking Age. On a comparative anthropological canvas perhaps plunder, like short-term urban labour, could 'provide the cash needed to succeed in the rural context — to accumulate bride-price, provide a dowry, or buy a home' (Brettell 2000, 102). Some early Viking Age raids were certainly very different from the large military campaigns of later decades (see below).

This hypothesis merits further attention in the context of recent work on 'youth bulge' theory (Heinsohn 2003), which posits that warfare is often a corollary of societies in which young men represent a disproportionately large element of the population. In these cases there are simply not enough status roles to go around, leading to violent competition. Such a demographic imbalance could occur for many reasons, but selective female infanticide is an obvious candidate in the context of pre-Christian Scandinavia (Clover 1988, 169–70; Wicker 1998 and references therein). This interpretation differs from nebulous demographic determinism in that it depends on the internal structure of the population, rather than its size, and on the social mechanisms (such as selective female infanticide) which might have created it. The question 'why in the eighth century?' will be revisited below.

Economic determinism

Turning to urbanism and trade, arguments that emphasize their relevance to the Scandinavian diaspora are probably unassailable in very general terms. They do, however, merit reconsideration in detail. Western Europe's proto-urban centres, the so-called wics, boomed in the 'long eighth century' (Hansen & Wickham 2000; Hill & Cowie 2001; Fig. 23.1) and became frequent targets of Viking raids by the AD 830s to AD 840s (Hill 1981, 33). Moreover, a trickle of silver from the Abbasid Caliphate first reached Scandinavian settlements in northwestern Russia and the Baltic in the last two decades of the eighth century — quickly turning into a flood. One of the earliest examples is a hoard dating between AD 749 and AD 786 found near the Swedish-influenced settlement of Staraya Ladoga (Duczko 2004, 67). Duczko (2004, 62) describes the resulting expansion of Scandinavian trade in the east as 'silver fever'. The ebb and flow of this wealth has been viewed as a major driver of events in Viking Age Europe since at least the writing of Henri Pirenne (1939, 239–40; Bolin 1953; Randsborg 1980, 152–62; Hodges & Whitehouse 1983, 111–22; McCormick 2001, 606–13; Woolf 2007, 54; cf. Hodges 2006). Nevertheless, within this intellectual tradition opinion differs as to whether it was the presence of Arabic silver, or periodic reductions in its availability, which fuelled Scandinavian raiding in the west.

Disentangling the threads of these arguments, it is possible to make two relevant observations. Firstly, the importance of a sudden availability of silver in eastern Europe cannot be easily dismissed. Assuming that news could travel quickly in early Viking Age Europe (as implied by the network analyses of Sindbæk 2007a,b), it is entirely possible that the resulting gold-rush mentality (Duczko's 'silver fever'), spread immediately to western Scandinavia. The earliest raids, often on monastic treasuries, in Britain, Ireland and (to a lesser degree) the Frankish empire could well have been the result. If so, however, one must imagine that the acquired wealth was for Scandinavian consumption — rather than transhipment to the Islamic world. Based on Arab sources, the Rus (Scandinavian traders) brought furs and swords to Baghdad in the ninth century (McCormick 2001, 610–11). Neither of these were major products of Britain or Ireland. Slaves, a marketable human cargo that was available in the west, first entered the record of Scandinavian exchange with the caliphate in the early tenth century. Even then, however, there were western markets for western slaves (Holm 1986) and eastern sources for eastern demand (McCormick 2001, 733–77). Early Viking Age Scandinavia may well have been part of a world-system (cf. Barrett *et al*. 2000), but it is probably an exaggeration to speculate that monks captured at Lindisfarne in AD 793 ended their days in what is now Iraq.

Secondly, the beginning of Viking Age raiding in western Europe was *not* focused on urban centres, nor even on urbanized regions. The earliest targets were mainly monasteries and other settlements in rural areas of northern England, Scotland and Ireland (Hill 1981, 33; Etchingham 1996; Fig. 23.1). The actors in these raids were probably also of predominately rural background, if the traditional interpretation that they were mostly from western Norway remains valid (e.g. Wamers 1998). In short, *the Viking Age began as a rural rather than an urban phenomenon*. It may thus also have had little to do with targeting North Sea and Baltic trade — which was most intensive in the shipping lanes between wics at sites such as York, Dorestad, Ribe, Kaupang, Hedeby and Birka based, for example,

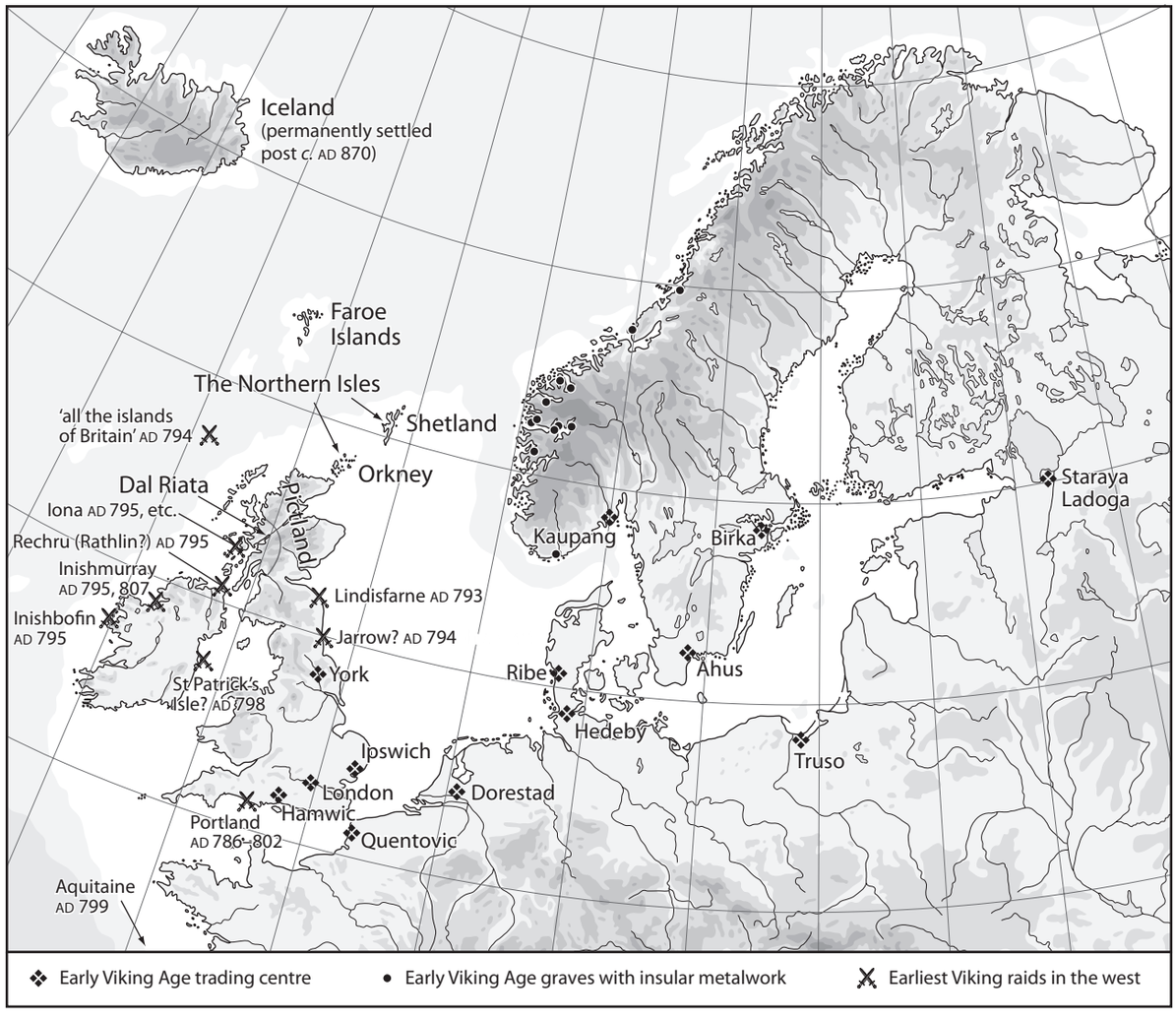

Figure 23.1. *Locations of major trading centres in the early Viking Age, of British and Irish metalwork from Scandinavian graves of* c. AD *800 and of the earliest Viking raids in the west (after Whitelock 1961, 35–7; Etchingham 1996, 60; Hennessy 1998, 275; Wamers 1998, 52; Downham 2000; Hill & Cowie 2001; Ridel 2007; Sindbæk 2007a). For clarity the distributions are indicative rather than comprehensive.*

on the distribution of eighth- to ninth-century coin, ceramic and glass finds (Näsman 2000b; Metcalf 2007; Sindbæk 2007a; Blackburn 2008). If western trade played a role in the earliest decades of the Viking Age, the mechanism must have been indirect.

This argument diverges from most past writing on the Viking Age and thus requires brief justification. The traditional view, as articulated by Sawyer (1982b, 78–97) for example, assumes that Scandinavian raids were common in the southern North Sea and English Channel in the late eighth and early ninth centuries. However, the evidence is slight and all of it is open to alternative interpretation: (1) provisions for coastal defence along the northern coast of the Carolingian empire and in southeast England; (2) the presence of Scandinavian exiles in the Carolingian empire; (3) a single raid on Dorset by three ships; and (4) warfare between the Carolingian empire and the Danish kingdom. Each will be considered briefly in turn.

Firstly, under AD 800 the *Royal Frankish Annals* record that Charlemagne built a fleet and set coastal guards because the sea 'was then infested with pirates' (Scholz 1970, 78). On the other side of the English Channel, Kentish charters refer to provisions for defence against pagans by AD 811 at the latest, and possibly as early as AD 792 (Brooks 1971). However, the

defences on both sides of the channel appear to have done their job. Viking raids did not become frequent in the southern North Sea until the AD 830s to AD 840s — despite being comparatively common in the rural north and west since AD 793.

Secondly, Scandinavian exiles *did* play an active role in Frankish diplomacy in the early years of the Viking Age — in AD 807, AD 812 and AD 813 for example (Coupland 1998, 87–9). Rather than being raiders, however, they were in the service of the empire, or seeking its support. Their biographies parallel those of contemporary exiles as diverse as Theodor of the Huns (AD 805) and Eardulf of Northumbria (AD 808) (Coupland 1998, 89).

Thirdly, the search for an early Viking raid on the urbanized 'south' leads to events at Portland in Dorset — between AD 786 and AD 802 based on cautious treatment of the relevant late ninth-century sources (Keynes 1997, 50). Three ships of 'Northmen' (from Norway or Denmark, the evidence is contradictory) killed an unsuspecting royal representative. Two aspects of this episode merit comment. Firstly, the royal official did not *expect* Scandinavian pirates. Secondly, if the ships were from Norway they are best interpreted in the context of contemporary Irish Sea activities, rather than as a piratical crossing of the southern North Sea trading zone. The isolated raids on Northumbria in AD 793–4 and Aquitaine in AD 799 should probably be seen in a similar light (Ridel 2007, 85–6).

Lastly, the 200 ships which attacked Frisia in AD 810 cannot be dismissed so easily (Scholz 1970, 91–3). They were part of a Danish royal campaign that arose from tensions between King Godfrid of Denmark and Charlemagne following the Carolingian conquest of Saxony. Was this royal campaign — of the kind fought along all the borders of the Carolingian empire — a Viking raid inspired by trade? Certainly much later expeditions by Scandinavian kings, of the tenth and eleventh centuries, are considered part of the wider Viking phenomenon. In the context of the early ninth century, however, one must ask if King Godfrid's fleet was really the same thing as the three wayward ships at Portland? Moreover, after AD 810 there were no further Scandinavian raids on Frankia until AD 820. Thirteen ships then tried (unsuccessfully) to raid Flanders and the Seine, before moving on to the more vulnerable Atlantic coast (Scholz 1970, 107–8). The urbanized southern North Sea zone was simply too well protected to sustain early Viking Age piracy. The silence of the archaeological evidence tells the same story. The earliest direct evidence for 'Viking' activity in the Carolingian empire is a silver hoard (Westerklief I) deposited around AD 850 in what is now the Netherlands (Besteman 2004).

Political determinism

Past arguments based on political determinism entail both external 'pull' and internal 'push' factors. Traditionally, weaknesses in the polities targeted by Scandinavian raiders have been interpreted as one of the most important political 'pull' factors. Like North Sea trade, however, this argument may merit rethinking. The problem is partly chronological. The episodes of political unrest which are known to have attracted Viking armies to one side or the other of the English Channel began decades into the ninth century (Brooks 1979; Wormald 1982). The earliest recorded Viking raids were paradoxically contemporary with the existence of strong hegemonic powers in both Anglo-Saxon England (Offa's Mercia) and continental Europe (Charlemagne's Frankish empire) (Hernæs 1997, 61). The lure of political meltdown is probably equally irrelevant to eighth- and ninth-century Scotland and Ireland, albeit for different reasons. Both regions were subdivided into many small competitive kingdoms — chiefdoms in comparative terminology (Earle 1997) — which must have had much in common with contemporary polities in Norway (cf. Myhre 1987,186–7; Ó Cróinín 1995; Woolf 2007). It is hard to imagine that they offered a softer target than neighbouring communities at home.

Turning to 'push' factors, the observation that the Scandinavian diaspora began in a time of powerful neighbours leads directly to one of the longest-standing and most convincing ingredients in the Viking Age recipe. That is the centralization of power within Scandinavian kingdoms and the diverse consequences of this process. Like 'wave of advance' assumptions, this idea owes its ultimate origin to medieval Scandinavian sources (which attribute Norse settlement in the west to the partly fictitious unification of Norway under Harald Fairhair) (e.g. Jónsson 1911, 53–4). However, it remains ubiquitous to the present day. In the words of Bjørn Myhre (2003, 60–61) (regarding the whole of the Scandinavian Iron Age, of which the Viking Age is the final subdivision):

> The history of Scandinavia in the Iron Age is an example of changes of cultural and political relations on the borders of an empire, from egalitarian tribal societies to chiefdoms and petty kingdoms. This development was a consequence of influence and pressure exerted from the major centres of continental Europe and of the positive actions of local political players and entrepreneurs operating in relation both to more distant centres and to their neighbouring societies.

The influence of powerful neighbours, particularly the Carolingian empire, took many forms. Firstly,

they provided models to emulate in terms of both centralized power and the potential role of plunder in maintaining a military following (Reuter 1985). Secondly, they provided an unambiguous defensive need for political centralization. Thirdly, piracy was a viable option for contenders in the realpolitik of the resulting competition within and between elite Scandinavian dynasties. Lastly, the west provided havens and military training grounds for exiles — some of whom reverted from client game-keepers to free-booting poachers (Coupland 1998).

To understand these processes in concrete terms it is worth briefly considering the perpetrators of Viking raids (cf. Lund 1989, 47–56). Many remained nameless. Some, however, entered the historical record as recognized actors. There were leaders without royal associations, such as Saxolb who died in Ireland in AD 837 (Downham 2007, 268). One might speculate that they served only the interests of themselves and their crews. There were royal deputies, such as Tomrair of Laithlinn (see above) who died with 1200 others in Ireland in AD 848 (Downham 2007, 274). There were exiled members of royal dynasties, such as Harald of Denmark who participated in Carolingian civil war in 841 (cf. Lund 1989, 47; Coupland 1998, 90–91). Lastly, if one accepts Godfrid's Frisian campaign of AD 810 as 'Viking' activity (I would not), there were reigning kings themselves.

All warriors in early medieval Europe were of elite status. To bear arms was to be a participant in politics (Halsall 2003). Within this broad social category, however, Viking raids would appear to have bolstered the treasuries of many different kinds of men. This applied to the relative status of leaders, but also to their crews. At one end of the scale, wealth could be acquired to marry and establish a household as already discussed (cf. Halsall 2003, 50–58, 106–8). At the other, wealth and its redistribution to a military retinue was the basis of chiefly and royal power (Reuter 1985). The role of raids probably escalated along this scale during the first five decades of the Viking Age (Ó Corráin 1998b, 425). Godfrid aside, the participation of royal deputies and dynasts noted above is first recorded in the AD 840s. The meagre evidence of fleet sizes tells the same story — rising from three at the end of the eighth century (Portland), to thirteen in AD 820 (northern and western Frankia) to two fleets of sixty in AD 837 (Ireland) (Nelson 1997, 39; Hennessy 1998, 339).

Heightened competition within Scandinavia may also have led to the freeing of slaves to cultivate new land, creating a group of free men seeking 'an opportunity to win wealth and reputation' (Skre 2001, 12). Alternatively, it has been argued that the expansionistic military and ecclesiastical policies (including early missions into Scandinavia) of the Christian kingdoms of western Europe may have inspired an ideologically driven reaction among the pagan elites of the north (Myhre 1993).

Returning to the demographic question posed above, it is also conceivable that an increasingly competitive and militarized society led to a preference for sons over daughters (manifested as female infanticide). This development could produce a volatile male 'youth bulge'. It would also heighten competition for brides with whom to establish a household, and thus the need for bride-wealth.

Ideological determinism

Many of the arguments summarized above regarding political centralization are well established by contemporary archaeological and historical evidence. Others, such as Bjørn Myhre's 'pagan reaction' model, Dagfinn Skre's 'slavery hypothesis' and the 'gendered demography' theory proposed here must remain more controversial (all having been offered in heuristic fashion). Their value lies in focusing attention on possible social factors behind the Viking Age Scandinavian diaspora. These are likely to be critical in a society where religion, mentality and warfare were inextricably linked (Price 2002).

Pursuing social causation further, two facets of Scandinavian ideology must have played an important role in the highly militarized and risky context of the Viking Age diaspora: honour and fatalism (e.g. Kuhn 1977, 162; Roesdahl 1991, 190; Simek 2004, 15). Without deeply seated beliefs in duty and predestination — and the iron hand of peer-pressure — it is difficult to imagine how crews could have been recruited for journeys from which return was doubtful throughout the Viking Age. Risks were manifold and manifest — from shipwreck and disease to violent death in battle. A wide range of primary sources (western, Arabic and Scandinavian) leave us in no doubt that many men did not survive their expeditions (e.g. Minorsky 1958, 152–3; Nelson 1991, 127; Sawyer 2000, 132; Whitelock *et al.* 1961, 36–7). To grasp why people were willing to embark on these high-risk enterprises it is worth citing Price's (2002, 53) evaluation of religious belief in Viking Age Scandinavia:

> We are left with a sobering conclusion, which is that the Vikings created one of the few known world mythologies to include the pre-ordained and permanent ruin of all creation and all the powers that shaped it, with no lasting afterlife for anyone at all. The cosmos began in the frozen emptiness of Ginnungagap, and will end in fire with the

> last battle. Everything will burn at the Ragnarok, whatever gods and humans may do. The outcome of our actions, our fate, is already decided and therefore does not matter. What is important is the manner of our conduct as we go to meet it.
>
> The psychological implications of this and other aspects of the Norse 'religion' bear thinking about.

The issue here, of course, is that there is no reason to think that beliefs in honour and fate were unique to Scandinavia, or to the Viking Age. They probably characterized most of 'Barbarian' Europe for much of the first millennium AD and (in places) beyond (Halsall 2003). A mentality geared for war is thus only a precondition for the Viking Age diaspora — at least until convincing evidence for a dramatic change in Scandinavian world view can be established for the eighth century.

The route west

It remains to discuss how the inhabitants of western Scandinavia knew how to find what they were looking for? Here the answer lies in an old but perhaps unnecessary controversy: was there pre-Viking Age contact between western Scandinavia and the British Isles? Although the degree of this contact varied dramatically over time and space, it clearly existed. Norwegian influence can be detected in the material culture of Migration Period England (e.g. Hines 1996), but this early contact did not continue into the later centuries of the first millennium (Gaut 2002). More important in the present context was the florescence of European trade in the eighth century. Although dismissed above as a direct cause of the Viking Age, it must have played an important secondary role as a conduit of information. Products of this trade ultimately made their way even to Arctic Norway (Munch *et al*. 2003). It is difficult to imagine that news did not travel with them.

Europe's main eighth-century trade routes connected the North Sea and Baltic Sea coasts of Scandinavia and its neighbours (Näsman 2000b). However, to draw the North Atlantic and Irish Sea into this network one must turn to the *Irish* diaspora of the early Middle Ages. The long-standing argument for an early intersection of Norwegian and Irish activity in the North Atlantic has a controversial pedigree (e.g. Hermanns-Auðardóttir 1991; Myhre 1993; Crawford 2002). The problem is the absence of convincing early settlement evidence from Iceland or the Faroe Islands. However, pedantry in this regard may lead us to discard both baby and bathwater. Based on reliable historical sources Irish ecclesiastics *were* active throughout western Europe and much of the eastern North Atlantic in the eighth and early ninth centuries (Ó Cróinín 1995; Dumville 2002). Before Scandinavian Vikings moved west, Irish clerics were moving north and east. Dícuill's account of AD 825 places Irish hermits in the Faroe Islands throughout much of the eighth century and in Iceland for a brief period around the beginning of the Viking Age (Howlett 1999).

Moreover, pre-Viking Age Irish influence can now be observed archaeologically in the Northern and Western Isles of Scotland (e.g. Forsyth 1995; Ralston 1997) and in the northeastern Scottish mainland (Carver 2004). Recent palynological evidence has also confirmed once highly contentious claims of cereal cultivation in the Faroe Islands prior to the Viking Age (cf. Buckland 1990; Edwards 2005; Hannon *et al*. 2005). Given that the sailing time between the Faroe Islands and western Norway is only a few days, it is inconceivable that Norse and Irish did not meet at some point in the eighth century — thus potentially opening the highway to the Irish Sea (cf. Smyth 1984, 167; Dumville 2002, 129).

Conclusions

This brief survey of the causes of the Viking Age has sought to alter received wisdom in several ways. The Scandinavian diaspora was not a product of technological, climatic or economic determinism. Nor did it result from 'overpopulation' or the lure of weak neighbours. Instead, bands of young men in need of bride-wealth may have set out in search of treasure. As has long been recognized, they were joined by would-be chieftains, royal deputies and exiles — seeking wealth to prevail in the face of increasing competition within Scandinavia. These motives combined with a fatalistic mentality to create what we observe as the beginning of the Viking Age. It may be unrealistic to pinpoint the spark that ignited this volatile cocktail. Nevertheless, one well-trodden option is the sudden availability of Abbasid coinage in the east — and western Scandinavia's efforts to find a comparable source of wealth. Another is a hypothetical meeting of Irish and Norse on the Faroe Islands — opening a route to the monastic riches of the Irish Sea region. It is enough to say that to explore the causes of the Viking Age one must give equal emphasis to sweeping processes of the *longue durée* and rapid, contingent, developments. Three ship-crews at Portland between AD 786 and AD 802 could not have anticipated that most of Anglo-Saxon England would be conquered by Viking armies in the AD 870s (Brooks 1979). Nevertheless, they were part of the causal chain that led to this eventuality — and many others.

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